

Stigma Research Laboratory (SRL)

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7* is not a four letter word**

Challenging neighbourhood stigma is really about advancing social justice. For a long time now, social justice has been approximately as fashionable as an orange skivvy left over from the 1970s. Recently it's been revived and rebadged under some now-sounding umbrellas like social inclusion and the community services industry - these labels being 'better and nicer', as Tasmanian-based cultural doyen Leo Schofield might say. Whatever it takes, perhaps, to get the lightbulb to want to turn.

The *Stigma Research Laboratory (SRL)* illuminates this space from a different angle. Playful and provocative, intelligent and elegant, this exhibition is the product of an experimental collaboration between Tasmanian artists John Vella, Philippa Steele and Scot Cotterell, working with the Housing and Community Research Unit and the Tasmanian School of Art at the University of Tasmania, Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania and the Moonah Arts Centre. *SRL* brings together contemporary art, academics and audiences - and shakes them all up. In the process, it shakes out some challenging questions about how and why we let our postcodes define us.

The timing of *SRL* could not be better. The current global economic downturn means we've started to see and hear more about Tasmanians losing their jobs and homes, facing unfamiliar challenges to their economic security and social status. We empathise most when they're badged or branded as 'people like us'. Part of 'our' neighbourhood, stakeholders in 'our' postcode. Can we push that a whole lot further? Can we imagine a community where no version of 7*** is a four-letter word?

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Project designer and developer, University of Tasmania

Challenging Stigma

One of our intentions in establishing the *Stigma Research Laboratory (SRL)* is to explore the possibilities for challenging the negative representations that are ascribed to certain urban neighbourhoods. The problem of stigma is an enduring one and difficult to address. Yet it has important effects as negative representations often serve to reinforce a sense of isolation and disconnection for those who live there. Also our capacity to disparage others can accentuate social inequalities as well as undermine our sense of collectivity.

The problems that can be attributed to stigma are significant but traditional urban policy responses have had only a limited impact. This is because so many contemporary policy initiatives are narrowly framed. The dominant paradigm is that spatial and economic inequalities are viewed as an inevitable consequence of the capitalist system and that structural interventions are required to ameliorate the most pernicious effects. The policies that are often called for include a more progressive taxation system and the steady flow of resources into locations that have been socially disadvantaged. To some extent, these forms of intervention have been successful and helped to bridge the divide between rich and poor neighbourhoods.

Yet in the last 30 years or so structural interventions have been superseded by an alternative paradigm that has sought to attribute the problems of poverty and inequality to individual failure or fecklessness. So many of the recent policy initiatives have therefore focussed on providing incentives for individuals to leave these disadvantaged neighbourhoods with the inevitable consequence that those remaining, in the minds of others, become even more stigmatised and associated with welfare dependency. A vicious circle sets in, so for example employers are reluctant to hire individuals who live in some neighbourhoods and businesses choose to locate their enterprises in areas further afield.

The problems associated with stigmatisation can therefore be traced back to the failure of successive governments to put in place the necessary fiscal

mechanisms to redistribute wealth more fairly. But there is also a psychological component to stigma in which the negative perceptions of the non-stigmatised are internalised by those who have been stigmatised. Given the causal factors that accentuate stigma and the reluctance of governments to commit sufficient funds to tackle the causal factors of social inequality, is there scope for other forms of intervention that might have a positive impact? While we must be realistic about what is possible, there is some potential in exploring interventions that seek to deliberately challenge the way we normally construe the social aspects of city life. It was with this in mind that we conceived of the idea of *SRL*. It is our hope that this project will facilitate debate and encourage a more reflexive understanding of our prejudices and the way these prejudices impact on others.

The subjectivities surrounding stigma

We rely on generalisations and stereotypes in our encounters with others. Very often we make judgements according to the work people undertake, the way they dress and speak, their age and gender and where they live. Of course, this form of stereotyping is inevitable as it enables us to make sense of the world. The degree to which we internalise the impact of other people's judgments is to some extent contingent on the power of those who judge. In a society so unequal as ours we assume that there is little scope for individuals or communities to challenge these assumptions.

When we try and understand the psychological aspects surrounding stigmatisation, a number of observations can be made. First, as the sociologist Erving Goffman¹ argued, stigma is best conceptualised as a social process in which certain individuals or groups are imbued with negative traits that violate accepted norms. Second, we know from the writings of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein² that we imbue others with attributes that we are fearful of in ourselves. Our desire to project our negative feelings outwards is therefore a defensive mechanism that we deploy to protect our sense of self. Third, we all discriminate in the conduct of our lives. The shortage of time and the myriad

of choices we make mean we are prone to form quick opinions and categorise people in simplistic ways. The cumulative impact of these judgements can be traumatic as some people who are aware of being stigmatised internalise these perceptions and start to feel a sense of inferiority. So being stigmatised can reinforce a sense of difference and a sensibility of 'us' versus 'them'.

We had these issues in mind when we began to reflect on the ways that stigma can be addressed. We all recognise the potential of art to poeticise our way of seeing the world and to offer us a way to think afresh. In an intriguing essay on Laughter, written in 1900, the philosopher Henri Bergson³ wrote 'If reality could immediately reach our senses and our consciousness, if we could come into direct contact with things and with each other, probably art would be useless, or rather we should all be artists'. For Bergson it was through art that we could actually provide a more immediate relationship with our surroundings and those we encounter. Bergson's recognition that art offers us all a way to re-imagine our relationship with our environment and with others is an important one for those seeking ways of exploring the problems associated with stigma.

We value art because it provides a vocabulary or space that enables us to imagine and adopt new ways of seeing the world. In the social sciences, subjectivity and the way it frames how we experience reality, has largely been eschewed in favour of a more materially focussed approach but there is an important strand of scholarship that has sought to consider these issues. For example, Georg Simmel⁴ in his essay 'The Metropolis and Mental life' published in 1903 explored the possibility for individuals to transcend the oppressive features of modern cities. Simmel argued that it was possible through an active engagement with one's environment and a sensibility towards others - an attitude he termed 'reserved'. Another writer who recognised the transformative potential of art was Walter Benjamin⁵ who construed the city, with all its complexity and contingency, as a setting in which we could poeticise our relationship with others. Benjamin was especially interested in the capacities afforded to the urban flâneur who chooses to stroll through the city for no other reason than to delight in the unfolding spectacle.

There is a tendency within government to assume that effective policy action requires imposing something from the outside and that the capacity for individuals to determine their own strategies and tactics is limited. *SRL* seeks to provide a contrast to the traditional urban policy forms of intervention. The art works provide ways of understanding stigma in a new light and in doing so provide us with a setting to rethink our assumptions. Phillipa Steele's *Make Yourself at Home* affirms the importance of domestic spaces in shaping our identity and the degree to which we attach significance to the ways we adorn our homes. It is the privatised spaces such as the home where we have the opportunities to express ourselves in ways that are denied to us in public and this is the main reason we are so interested in what we see.

When we walk the streets our way of projecting our identity is constrained but the clothes we wear provide us with some scope to both objectify our identity and demonstrate our desire to belong. The assorted photographs of John Vella and his family entitled *FIT (7_ _ _)* provide us with a way of thinking more deeply about how we seek both to conform but also to retain a sense of individuality. The exhibit *FIT (7_ _ _)* also includes video footage of 8 different Hobart suburbs which brings to mind the ease by which we project onto certain neighbourhoods a social and political imaginary that may bear little relation to the experiences of those who live there. John's second exhibit, a video installation entitled *Status Free Vehicle* provides us with a view of the sky above the different suburbs of Hobart. Of course *Status Free Vehicle* can be interpreted in all sorts of ways but I suspect one intention behind it is to impress upon us that we cannot easily escape the effects of stigma in a society in which we seek to demarcate and order.

Finally, Scot Cotterell's *Free Tattoo* offers us the opportunity to consider how individuals have the capacity and agency to project back on to those who judge us. We are made aware through the elaborate practice of tattooing of our desire for individualism, but also to be part of a wider social grouping. *Free Tattoo* with its music, video footage and furniture entices us to think through the different ways in which we seek to manage this tension.

All of the artwork produced in *SRL* encourages us to reflect on how quick we are to judge but also how our judgements can have long lasting repercussions. We can form our own view as to whether stigma is something we just have to endure and accept; a price perhaps we pay for living in a social world? However, it is our hope that *SRL* offers a new vantage point to consider the issue in more imaginative and exciting ways.

KEITH JACOBS

Associate Professor in the Housing and Community Research Unit,
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SCOT COTTERELL

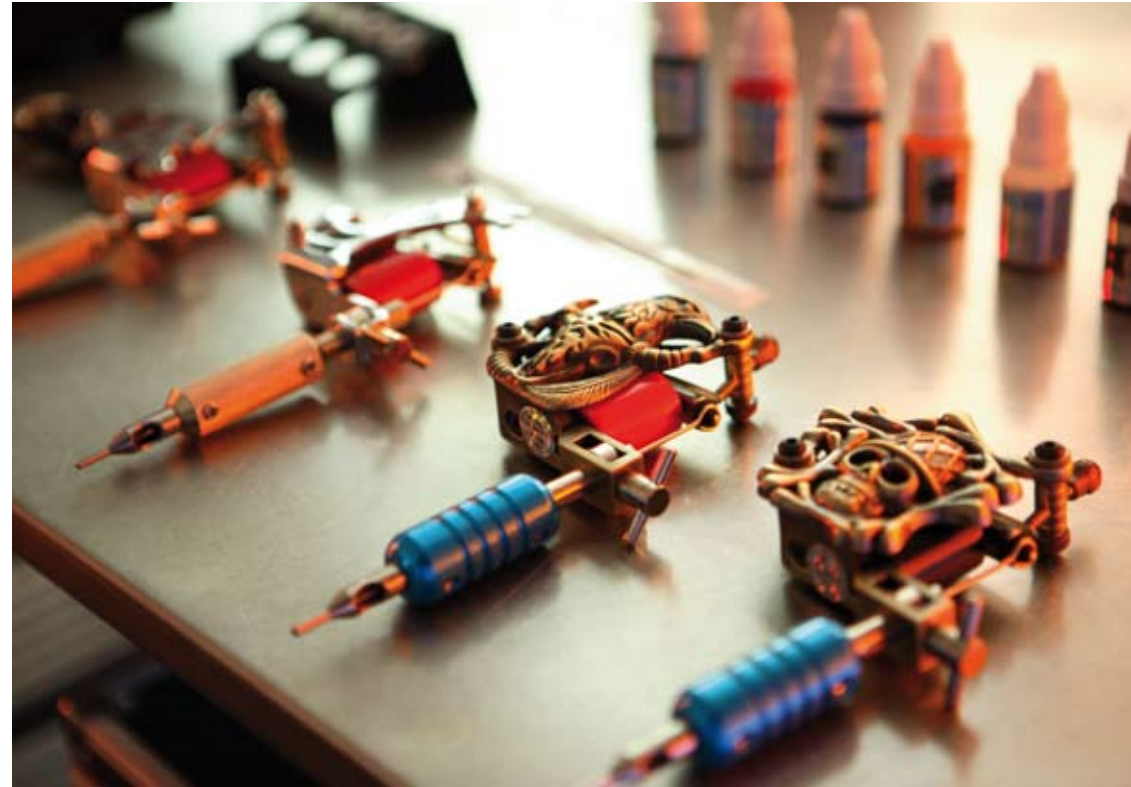
Free Tattoo 2009

Prepared room, dentists' chair, tattoo equipment, VCD with stereo sound, block mounted posters.

Free Tattoo deals broadly with the dynamics of stigma through using the tattoo - with its various loaded histories, subtexts and layers - as a symbol of marking territories, taste and judgment. As markers, tattoos transcend class, race, gender and religion but carry with them various spurious and romantic histories of identity and individualism, separation and unification. As a social bond, a cultural and sub-cultural identifier, a rite of passage, a secret language and popular fad, the tattoo has endured time.

Free Tattoo grew from an idea to collect tattoo imagery from around the Moonah area, as a reflection of place. Over time however, this approach seemed too detached and spectatorial. A change of method lead to collecting objects and images from people I knew and met, this in turn seemed too much like using parts of people to communicate my idea. The orchestrated display of objects that has resulted is like a closed museum display, a composite of ideas from spaces I have been to and observed. It is an imagined and personal space that invites contemplation.

The objects that make up this work were drawn from disparate locations and are brought together here to illuminate a claustrophobic yet nebulous idea. Stigma seems to operate at the borders of beings and thoughts, a heavy but illusory structure incredibly personal but generic to us all.





PHILIPPA STEELE

Make Yourself at Home 2009

2-day performance and installation

Found objects, wristbands, acrylic paint, still images, video, canvas tape, desktop computer, laptop computer and electric light.

Photographs: Sean Fennessy

(Pigeon Photographs: Fred Showell)

(Pigeon Video: Philippa Steele)

Hair: Carolyn Wigston

Dimensions variable

Make Yourself At Home is a performance installation where participants record the details of their current residential address. With this information, I then assign them one of eight Personal Homing Profiles (PHP) and tag them through the use of a colour-coded wristband. Named after breeds of domestic pigeon, these profiles detail characteristics such as home decorating style, lucky bearing and optimal site selection.

Object design/placement and colour are used to embody each personality type: a room is constructed for each of the homing profiles, based on the suggested traits of the individuals within that group. In each case, a jumble of loosely divinatory text describes the Profile in detail, explaining their position and role within the neighbourhood in an overtly mystical, vague and optimistic manner. Each Homing Profile is simultaneously directed at the singular and the collective — it is anticipated that no matter what homing profile a person is assigned, there will be some traits within its description that they can identify with.

The work playfully examines the issue of stigmatisation by overplaying the notion that our house and suburb determine who we are as individuals. Part social experiment and part divination, *Make Yourself At Home* fabricates points of discrimination at which individuals can simultaneously connect to and detach themselves from. For example, the piece suggests that a member of the Holle Cropper group is 'a natural peacemaker and diplomat,' capable of 'remarkable inventions for the home.' These bold statements are plainly and overtly unfounded, but we are drawn to their possibilities. By exploring—and literally tagging people with—the antithesis of social stigmas (which is, say, charismatic or positive attributes) *Make Yourself At Home* is an artificial space which aims to nullify the negative through an artificial emphasis on its opposite.





JOHN VELLA

Status Free Vehicle (SFV)

1 hour drive 6.30-7.30am, Saturday 2 May 2009

(Hobart City, Mornington, Clarence, Sandy Bay, West Hobart, North Hobart, Moonah, Glenorchy)

1 hour/DVD video loop

Video footage: John Vella

Video post production: Lotte Kronborg

Dimensions variable

Status Free Vehicle (SFV) (prototype model)

Spray painted cardboard and plastic

20 x 9 x 20cm, 2009

SFV is an adapted vehicle designed to transport a large cylinder with a circular opening in the ceiling. SFV drives through suburbs of diverse demographics. Only the sky is visible. Anonymous passengers in transit, dressed in uniform full-body jump suits, exist in a fleeting state of status, and hopefully stigma-free bliss.

FIT (7_ _ _)

12.30-1.30 Saturday 25 April 2009

1 hour video/DVD loop x 2 (8 suburbs) and photographs

Video footage: Lucy Hawthorne, Louise Josephs, Lotte Kronborg, Andrew Rewald, Nicole Robson, John Vella

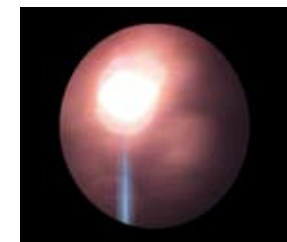
Video post production: Lotte Kronborg

Photographer: Sean Fennessy

Assistant: Bojana Martinovic

Dimensions variable

A series of main streets, and shopping centres, in eight Hobart suburbs were filmed at the same time on the same day for one hour. Each video was examined, and the details catalogued so as to determine the 'fashion' of that place. The artist then purchased clothes, and dressed himself and his family according to each specific postcode. A photographer photographed the 'Vella' family against a *chroma* blue screen.







Stigma

The mark of Cain. The marks on Jesus' hands that convinced Thomas.
The stain. In Tasmania, the convict stain. That's what they called it, not so long ago in this place. To be derived from convict stock. In my memory time.

Stigmata - the special child in South America whose hands bled. The fear and magic. The attraction of that image. (Blood is always black in a newspaper photograph). A little Innocent. Puberty seemed to be involved, the last moment of innocence, pre-sexual. A body marked. The hiding of track marks, an addict tries to cover her arms, I read her state in that mark. The Tattoo. The tattoo of the concentration camp. The tattoo of the convict, inscribing the code, the code only other convicts could know. Scot tells me about the Russian prison tattoos and how applying one without the 'earning' of it is to tease death. The sailor. We are outside. We mark whale bone as we mark ourselves, it is closeness, it is us apart – we live out there and we die here. We make no sense in this place. We mark to recognise ourselves.

Who loves you? Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Bethesda Ministries International, Christian City Church, Christian Revival Crusade, Church of Christ, Evangelical Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed Church, Roman Catholic, Ulverstone Faith Centre, Beth-El Christian Church, Disciples of Jesus, Gospel Hall, Full Gospel Church, Free Reformed Church of Legana, Salvation Army, Smithton New Life Centre, Worldwide Church of God, Tasmania?

We are of this place and our scars tell who we are, we are of this place and we cut through black to pink and fill the space with the earth we are born onto. A quiet girl is digging into her hand with a Stanley knife; I take it from her, she smiles, sweetly. Her arms are bloodless white. The scars on her arms are whiter.

The feel of isolation and disconnection associated with stigma is ultimately pan-suburban – and is ever more subtle and depressingly insidious where you

are not expecting to find it. Sitting in Sandy Bay, from the balcony I can see the Derwent estuary through the car-port of the waterfront house at the back, as well as into the backyards of terrace houses, semi-detached's, conjoined units, bungalows – all manner of real estate set cheek-by-jowl and home to renters, home buyers, students, pensioners, and young and established professionals. On the surface it has the profile of a vibrant community, but during the de-populated working day it becomes strangely disappointing. A surprising number of lone, usually older, women with small mop-like dogs appear on tawdry errands and then, like anemones, rapidly disappear back inside their units. Between their hairdresser, a canine companion and the address, I imagine their society and economies are fully stretched. And today I watched a neat track-suit fuss over two wheelie-bins and spend quite some time aligning and realigning the bins with the curb (to assist the perfect collection of their highly ordered contents?). I could afford my amused regard as it didn't seem to be a mental health matter, rather it was quite purposeful and in keeping with perfected expectations. But below the light entertainment of these scenes hangs guilt, as I believe those watched don't easily belong in this place; for them being here is hard in many ways and, cruelly, feels best when they are elsewhere referring to its address. By the end of the working day when the suburb repopulates, a tide of busy respectability will dissipate the underbelly of despondency - and it won't seem such a hard-earned sacrifice until it empties again tomorrow.

And the badness accretes to the mark and the shame clings. But to take the mark on to place it on the body, to associate with and dissociate from. In the newsagency ten magazines about tattoos, the digital football game in which you choose your tattoo before you play. What is happening? The mark has lost force, it becomes fashion. You don't earn it, you adopt it. The force of the mark is sullied, degraded.

Bazza McKenzie, Dame Edna Everage, Kath and Kim were made from lampooning Australia's insular suburban mentality, and nowhere is their regard

greater than 'at home'. Ocker, bogan, hornbags. Highly and widely popular, their exposés on white, suburban culture are valued precisely because they mock customs and ideals we recognise and which we also, preferably, attribute to others. Australian audiences may cringe, but they also get the joke. Humour is a hallmark of popular Australian identity, 'taking the piss' is tradition and as often as not it is quite robust. Every community has its wit, those who give as good as they get, and so little goes unanswered. Hobart dwellers venturing North must pass the mythical Flannelette Curtain at Creek Road, and here southbound visitors must transgress the retaliatory Latte Line.

Marked out. Take it back, own it, reverse its power. I am from here, and it is something and Fuck You. I will not be able to enter yours, to own yours, to marry yours so I will scare you out and hold to mine. I will cleave to mine. This is my tribe we mark ourselves blue with wode, red with ochre, we wear this thing, we want to look as not like you as we can. We are punk attitude. We sicken at your lack of life. And you think we are not community, we cannot be happy, this mess should bother us. Messy, hard, real, physical - and we mark ourselves to that. We burn our skin, we scarify, we cut and ink, we inscribe ourselves into our life and we are more one than you.

*Let bogans
be bogans*

Graffiti often says it best. Anonymity and/or fun and/or frustration combine occasionally to unfurl wit or truths or downright spitefulness. As an open-source gallery and forum for all manner of stigma and the stigmatised – race, religion, class, sexuality, gender, even criminality and mental health issues – and there is also a place for 'places,' and with this the callous associations that can be thrown at them. *Darling it hurts*, screamed the famously reworked Darlinghurst graffiti in Sydney, mocking its proximity to infamous Oxford Street. More often, however, the text is simply callous – having a 'go' at imaginary mores (or lack of them) and often the place names are interchangeable: Question; *what does*

a Moonah girl use as protection during sex? Answer, a bus shelter. Question; what's the difference between a New Town High boy and a Claremont girl? Answer; she has a higher sperm count. Such endless textual noise is fuelled by its innate challenge and by counter-attack, but ultimately this bit of harmless fun works slowly to shape local prejudice.

You put your mark on me, you place me here, you hold me here but I will not be held so here is *my* mark. Mark me so you see me coming and your kind recognise me. Am I threat? Am I allowed in here to serve? Do I return beyond the pale after dark? Do I spend my weekends in the township and my week with you in the big house? Does my colour mark me? All the marks I have, the ones you placed on me, the ones I added, the marks that will not be covered. How deep are these marks? If I get rich will they disappear? If I erase the tattoo what new mark replaces it, what scar covers the number under the skin?

Will that mark return? Has it ever gone away? You have marked me, it remains, it always speaks, it will not be buried. It cannot be erased. You have done this to me.

What ground can we meet on? Must we be naked? If we are naked I am still black, or white, or Chinese, or small, or speaking that language you cannot understand, or being from the place that you are not, that you do not know, that you cannot know, that you will not know. I am from there. It is in me and will not be denied, by you, it cannot be denied, by me. It is me. How much have you created that place? I will move but I will take that place with me. I will become but that is my place. It cannot be else. Will you respect that?

SEAN KELLY

Writer and Curator,
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Director, CAST

BIOGRAPHIES

SCOT COTTERELL was born in Victoria, Australia in 1979, and is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Tasmania School of Art. Scot's work is interdisciplinary and concerned with experiential responses to technology and media. His work uses sound, video, image and objects to create environments that reflect upon cultural phenomena. Scots' exhibition history includes: *The Fall*, MONA FOMA Festival, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, *Encoding_Experience_*, Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania and *Your Call is Important to us...*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Cotterell has curated exhibitions for CAST Gallery, INFLIGHT ARI, and Boiler Room: National Improvisation Laboratory, Hobart and performed at Salon Bruit, Berlin, Overtoom 301, Amsterdam, ElectroFringe new media Arts Festival, Newcastle and Liquid Architecture 6, National Festival of Sound Arts, Melbourne. Scot is the current director of INFLIGHT art and is represented by Bett Gallery, Hobart.

PHILIPPA STEELE is an emerging Tasmanian artist. Early investigations into sculptural forms and exhibition design led to her interest in performance art. Crossing a range of mediums, her work encompasses graphic design, installation, sound and video, with a strong emphasis on community involvement and interaction. Through her performance installations, she has gone on to explore the vagaries of visual evidence as the validation of truth. The ongoing search for a mode of expression that can engage an unsuspecting audience culminates in a process she calls "switching the dark on".

Since completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honours at the University of Tasmania in Hobart, she has worked concurrently as a designer, creative consultant and entrepreneur, co-founding new art firm Backstory with her partner Fred Showell. She now lives in Launceston and is creating a studio within her new home.

JOHN VELLA was born in Sydney and moved to Hobart in 1996, where he lives with his wife and two children. Since dropping out of Architecture in 1988 he has: traveled overseas; worked as a waiter, labourer, photographer, telemarketer, exhibitions officer and gallery attendant; completed a DipFA (National Art School), BFA (Hons) and an MFA, at the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart where he is the Head of Sculpture.

Vella's work has been exhibited and reviewed nationally and internationally. He has received a number of Arts Tasmania, and Australia Council, grants and completed five major public art commissions. John Vella is represented by Criterion Gallery. His work is held under his house and in public and private collections.

EXHIBITION: This publication accompanies the exhibition *Stigma Research Lab (SRL)* at Moonah Arts Centre 16 - 29 May, 2009.

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